

What Is Claimed Is:

1. A programmable snack dispenser comprising:

a snack dispenser apparatus adapted to contain a plurality of snack items, the snack dispenser apparatus being adapted and configured to be altered between a snack inaccessible condition and a snack accessible condition, the snack dispenser in the snack inaccessible condition resisting access to the snack items, the snack dispenser in the snack accessible condition facilitating access to at least one of the snack items;

an input receiving mechanism operatively connected to the snack dispenser apparatus, the input receiving mechanism being adapted to enable a user to input identification information into the input receiving mechanism;

an electronic storage apparatus connected to the snack dispenser apparatus and in communication with the input receiving mechanism, the electronic storage apparatus being adapted and configured for storage of credit information, the credit information being indicative of a credit amount associated with the identification information; and

the snack dispenser being adapted and configured to alter the snack dispenser apparatus from the snack inaccessible condition to the snack accessible condition upon a user

inputting the identification information into the input receiving mechanism and the credit information equaling or exceeding a predetermined value.

5           2. A programmable snack dispenser as set forth in claim 1 wherein:

the input receiving mechanism comprises a key reader adapted to read identification information stored on a key when the key is positioned in communication with the key reader; and

10           the snack dispenser is adapted and configured to alter the snack dispenser from the snack inaccessible condition to the snack accessible condition upon the key reader reading the identification information and the credit information equaling or exceeding the predetermined value.

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3. A programmable snack dispenser as set forth in claim 2 wherein the key reader comprises a card reader.

4. A programmable snack dispenser as set forth in claim 2  
20 further comprising a coin acceptor adapted and configured to accept coins, the snack dispenser being adapted and configured to alter the snack dispenser from the snack inaccessible

condition to the snack accessible condition upon a user placing sufficient coinage in the coin acceptor, said sufficient coinage having a coinage value equaling or exceeding the predetermined value.

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5. A programmable snack dispenser as set forth in claim 4 wherein the snack dispenser is adapted and configured to alter the snack dispenser from the snack inaccessible condition to the snack accessible condition upon the key reader reading the  
10 identification information and a combination value equaling or exceeding the predetermined value, the combination value being a combination of the credit information and the value of coinage inserted into the coin acceptor.

15 6. A programmable snack dispenser as set forth in claim 1 wherein:

the input receiving mechanism is adapted to enable each user of a plurality of users to input into the input receiving mechanism identification information associated with said each  
20 user;

the electronic storage apparatus is adapted and configured for storage of credit information for said each user, the credit

information for said each user being indicative of a credit amount associated with the identification information for said each user.

5        7. A method comprising:

providing a programmable snack dispenser as set forth in claim 6;

storing in the electronic storage apparatus credit information for said each user of the plurality of users, the credit information for said each user being indicative of a credit amount associated with identification information for said each user.

8. A method comprising:

15        providing a programmable snack dispenser as set forth in claim 1;

storing in the electronic storage apparatus credit information for each of a plurality of users, the credit information for each of the plurality of users being indicative of a credit amount associated with identification information for said each of the plurality of users.

9. A method comprising:

providing a programmable snack dispenser as set forth in  
claim 1;

receiving a first amount of money from a first user;

5 receiving a second amount of money from a second user;

storing in the electronic storage apparatus a first credit  
information, the first credit information having a value

dependent on the first amount of money received from the first  
user, the first credit information being associated with first

10 identification information, the first identification information  
being information identifying the first user;

storing in the electronic storage apparatus a second credit  
information, the second credit information having a value

dependent on the second amount of money received from the second  
15 user, the second credit information being associated with second

identification information, the second identification

information being information identifying the second user.

10. A method as set forth in claim 9 wherein:

20 the snack dispenser is adapted and configured to alter the  
snack dispenser apparatus from the snack inaccessible condition  
to the snack accessible condition upon the first identification

information being input into the input receiving mechanism and the first credit information equaling or exceeding the predetermined value;

the snack dispenser is adapted and configured to alter the  
5 snack dispenser apparatus from the snack inaccessible condition to the snack accessible condition upon the second identification information being input into the input receiving mechanism and the second credit information equaling or exceeding the predetermined value.

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11. A method as set forth in claim 10 wherein the input receiving mechanism comprises a key reader, the method further comprising:

providing a first key to the first user, the first key  
15 having stored thereon the first identification information, the key reader being adapted to read the first identification information upon the first key being positioned in communication with the key reader; and

providing a second key to the second user, the second key  
20 including the second identification information, the second key having stored thereon the second identification information, the key reader being adapted to read the second identification

information upon the second key being positioned in communication with the key reader.

12. A method as set forth in claim 12 wherein:

5 the key reader comprises a card reader;  
the first key comprises a first card; and  
the second key comprises a second card.

13. A method comprising:

10 providing a vending key to a user, the vending key  
including electronically readable identification information  
relating to the user;

providing a programmable snack dispenser, the snack  
dispenser including a key reader adapted to read the  
15 identification information on the vending key;

programming the snack dispenser with credit information  
associated with the vending key;

configuring the snack dispenser such that when the user  
positions the vending key relative to the key reader in a manner  
20 to enable the vending key to be read by the key reader, then the  
programmable snack dispenser determines whether the credit  
information is sufficient to warrant dispensing of a snack from

the snack dispenser.

14. A method as set forth in claim 13 wherein the vending  
key comprises a vending card and wherein the key reader  
5 comprises a card reader.

15. A method comprising:  
accessing a snack dispenser having a key reader adapted to  
read a vending key, the snack dispenser being adapted to  
10 determine whether to permit vending of a snack item from the  
snack dispenser by comparing information on the vending key to  
information which is stored in the snack dispenser and  
associated with the vending key; and  
placing the vending key adjacent the key reader in a manner  
15 to enable the snack dispenser to vend the snack item.

16. A method as set forth in claim 15 further comprising  
removing the snack item from the snack dispenser.

20 17. A method as set forth in claim 15 wherein the snack  
dispenser is adapted to permit vending of the snack item if  
credit information stored in the snack dispenser indicates that



a holder of the vending key has sufficient credit to purchase the desired item.

18. A method as set forth in claim 15 wherein the snack  
5 dispenser comprises an electronic storage apparatus in  
communication with the key reader, the electronic storage  
apparatus being adapted and configured for storage of credit  
information, the credit information being indicative of a credit  
amount associated with identification information stored on the  
10 vending key.

19. A method as set forth in claim 15 wherein the vending  
key comprises a vending card and wherein the key reader  
comprises a card reader.

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20. A snack dispensing method comprising:  
providing first and second vending keys, the first key  
having electronically-readable first identification information  
stored thereon, the second key having electronically-readable  
20 second identification information stored thereon, the second  
identification information being different than the first  
identification information;

providing a programmable snack dispenser, the snack dispenser including a key reader, the key reader being adapted to read the first identification information stored on the first key when the first key is positioned in communication with the key reader, the key reader being adapted to read the second identification information stored on the second key when the second key is positioned in communication with the key reader, the snack dispenser containing a plurality of snack items, the snack dispenser being alterable between a snack inaccessible condition and a snack accessible condition, the snack dispenser in the snack inaccessible condition resisting access to the snack items, the snack dispenser in the snack accessible condition facilitating access to at least one of the snack items, the snack dispenser further comprising an electronic storage apparatus adapted and configured for storage of first credit information and second credit information, the first credit information being indicative of a credit amount associated with the first key, the second credit information being indicative of a credit value associated with the second key, the snack dispenser being adapted and configured to alter the snack dispenser from the snack inaccessible condition to the snack accessible condition upon the key reader reading the first

identification information and the first credit information  
equaling or exceeding a predetermined value, the snack dispenser  
being adapted and configured to alter the snack dispenser from  
the snack inaccessible condition to the snack accessible

5 condition upon the key reader reading the second identification  
information and the second credit information equaling or  
exceeding a predetermined value;

storing the first credit information in the snack  
dispenser; and

10 storing the second credit information in the snack  
dispenser.